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ABSTRACT

This report attempts to show that the role of administering and interpreting psycho-educational instruments should not be the major function of the modern school psychologist. This is not to say that the need does not exist, at times, for psycho-educational evaluation; however excessive emphasis on this particular role results in limited effectiveness for the school psychologist as measured in terms of client growth. Additional responsibilities for the school psychologist could include: offering evening courses for parents in effective child rearing practices; leading sensitivity training seminars for teachers and school administrators; training paraprofessionals to work with teachers and students; providing group counseling for potential dropouts; designing a curriculum in the area of life adjustment skills or offering courses in the development of self-understanding for students. Requests for effective professional psychological services from teachers, parents, school administrators and students seem to become more urgent every year. It is the opinion of the writer that functioning school psychologists must expand and intensify their roles, as well as critically evaluate the services they are providing, if they are to effectively alleviate suffering and help to develop caring and competent citizens. (Author/GC)

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Expanding the Role of the School Psychologist

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

by: John P. Raftery

The role of the psychologist in the school has been receiving considerable attention in recent years in terms of the relevancy of the services that are provided to clients. Serious questions are being raised concerning the traditional role of administering and interpreting tests (Bennett, 1970; Kraft, 1970; Rudnick & Berkowitz, 1968). An often stated criticism from teachers and school administrators is that the school psychologist works with a child for three to four hours, writes a report and closes the case on that child. Minimal follow-up or consultation with the student or the teacher is common. The present report is a description of an alternate role developed by the writer as he interacted with students, teachers and parents as a school psychologist in an urban school setting.

1. In working with teachers in the area of classroom management, the experience of the writer has been that an effective method of helping teachers to try new techniques is to demonstrate the techniques in the classroom. Quite frequently the writer has taken over a class for a teacher while the teacher is requested to observe the methods being implemented with students presenting behavioral problems. Once the approach is demonstrated (e.g. modeling, reinforcement, extinction, contingency contracting, etc.) a brief discussion occurs immediately with the teacher in order to explain the theory behind the procedure and its effect on the behavior. This on-the-spot demonstration is effective in motivating teachers to

modify their traditional techniques of responding to students. Providing relevant readings as well as weekly follow-up sessions and classroom observations frequently results in improved functioning for the teacher as well as the students.

2. In a large junior-high located in the inner city, the school psychologist was requested to assist the school staff in the area of discipline. The frequency of disruptive behavior and suspensions from the school were high. Teachers felt powerless in maintaining discipline while the school administrators were skeptical as to what to do to maintain order in the school. The school psychologist prepared a brief questionnaire that was designed to collect data on the teachers' perceptions concerning the problems in the school, possible solutions to these problems, and their views on participating in a series of after-school workshops. The response was quite favorable and arrangements were made for the workshops at which agreement on standards of school discipline and methods of enforcement were discussed. The teachers and administrators shared their frustrations as well as their ideas in an atmosphere of mutual cooperation and respect during the workshops. The final outcome of the meetings was the development of a code of discipline that was printed and distributed to the staff, the students and the parents. Students and parents were requested to sign a form indicating that they had read the code of discipline and to return these forms to the school along with any suggestions they wished to make concerning the program.

The code of discipline also included rewarding activities that could be earned (e.g. gym time, field trips, pool time, movies, free class time, lounge time, etc.) as well as the consequences for failing to follow the code. A positive, encouraging approach was used whereby emphasis was placed on seeing the students as responsible and deserving people. The first three weeks of the program involved much trial and error testing by the students to determine if the code was going to be implemented. The entire school staff held firmly to the published code and displayed support for each other. The consequences of breaking the code of discipline (e.g. loss of school privileges, extra duties, make-up work after school, etc.) were enforced in a consistent and firm manner while the earning of desirable activities for appropriate school behavior was administered in a positive and encouraging way. The rate of disruptive behavior and the frequency of school suspensions decreased significantly thereafter and the teachers reported increased academic productivity. Periodic follow-up meetings with the school staff were arranged in order to ascertain the progress of the program and to make any necessary adjustments. The role of the school psychologist as a consultant and facilitator to the program resulted in the school staff designing and implementing a program that was effective in alleviating a serious problem.

3. Many school related behavioral problems are the result of improper child-rearing methods practiced by parents. A surprising number of intelligent and caring parents are often

unaware of appropriate methods of child rearing and uninformed as to whom they can turn to for professional assistance. The school psychologist can assist by helping parents to identify problem areas of the child and to evaluate the effectiveness of the usual procedures implemented by the parents in dealing with these problems. Providing the parents with relevant readings and allowing time for the discussion of realistic alternative methods of handling specific problems through follow-up sessions are necessary. Involving the child directly in the planning of the treatment strategy is advisable by informing him of the goals and procedures to be implemented and requesting his cooperation with the program. The major role of the school psychologist in this area is one of teaching and informing parents in the area of child development and growth and in effective parent functioning. The professional expertise of the school psychologist as well as his supportive understanding and caring of the participants frequently results in improved functioning for parents and child.

4. Offering in-service workshops in school in which parents and teachers participate is another approach that provides the school psychologist with the opportunity to effectively meet the needs of the students, parents, and teachers. One approach that implemented this model involved a group of Grade 6 students who had been unable to adjust to an open-class structure. The thirteen students were placed in a self-contained classroom that was designed to improve their "behavioral and academic functioning." However, the functioning

of the students continued to deteriorate in spite of this new placement. Parents were contacted by the teacher and the school psychologist and requested to participate in weekly group meetings at the school with other parents for the purpose of helping the school staff to better meet the needs of their children. The initial meetings were concerned with the sharing of common problems encountered by parents and teachers in dealing with children. Later group sessions focused on specific problems of individual students including a description of the problem behavior and methods available to deal with the problem. The parents and the teacher were requested to keep daily records of problems occuring and to be ready to share these experiences at the weekly sessions. The group sessions were kept as informal as possible with maximum participation by all members encouraged. The focus of the sessions was events happening in the here and now with special emphasis given to the avoiding of the placement of blame for the problems of the students. The importance of consistent attendance at the meetings as well as follow-through at home by the parents on the suggestion from the group meetings were stressed. The school psychologist was available for consultation on an individual basis if requested by the parents. The school psychologist and the teacher were supportive of any efforts made by the parents to deal more effectively with their children. This model presents the school psychologist, the parents and the teachers with an opportunity to work together as a team for the benefit of the students. The parents in the group felt very positive about having a specific time each week

to discuss the developmental problems of their children in a friendly and supportive environment.

5. A recent federal court order requiring the busing of large numbers of students for the purpose of school integration presented the school psychologist with an opportunity to work with the curriculum committee of the teachers' union. Many teachers had minimal experience with minority students and these teachers were concerned as to what effect the integration would have on their daily classroom activities. The psychologist worked with the committee in designing a manual that described various human relations programs that had been used successfully in other integrated school systems. Principles of classroom management and group guidance procedures were also reviewed in the manual. Plans are now underway to use the manual in a workshop setting whereby teachers and school administrators can work cooperatively to make school integration a positive experience for all.

6. The role of the school psychologist with some referrals requires functions that are rarely discussed in graduate training programs. One such case involved a referral from a grade 6 teacher of a boy whom she described as "extremely tense and hostile in class lately with minimal completion of academic work." The teacher reported that the behavior was a recent occurrence and that she was unable to determine any cause and effect relationship to explain this behavior. Individual sessions with the boy were of minimal value in terms of arriving at an understanding of the problem behavior. Arranging for a meeting with the boy's

parents resulted in a firm refusal from the father to meet with the school psychologist. The boy's mother, however, was quite anxious to speak with the school psychologist and several individual sessions with her indicated that this young woman was experiencing strong feelings of anxiety, helplessness and confusion because of recent traumatic marital conflicts. Heated arguments and physical assaults by her husband had recently reached the point where the woman had been attacked with a knife by her spouse. The young boy had been present during these frightening episodes and he became so overwhelmed with fear that he locked himself in his room and hid under his bed until the ordeal was over. Additional attempts to meet with the boy's father failed. At this point, the psychologist strongly encouraged the mother to seek immediate court assistance before serious bodily injury occurred. The woman was understandably reluctant to take this step because of the possible repercussions from her husband as well as her strong feeling that no one in the court would believe her story. With the guarantee that the psychologist would accompany her and the child to court, a hearing was arranged and a restraining order was issued by the judge against her husband. Following the court action, the psychologist assisted the family in contacting real estate agencies in order to locate a new place of residence. The affective and behavioral functioning of both mother and son improved. Bi-weekly counseling sessions with the mother continued for several months thereafter with periodic conferences at the school in order to ascertain the boy's functioning in school. Without the

use of the courts and the consistent follow-through of the school psychologist, it is doubtful that the above crisis could have been resolved within the given time period.

In this report, the writer has attempted to show that the role of administering and interpreting psycho-educational instruments does not have to be and, in fact, should not be the major function of the modern school psychologist. This is not to say that the need does not exist, at times, for psycho-educational evaluation but rather that excessive emphasis on this particular role results in limited effectiveness for the school psychologist as measured in terms of client growth. Additional responsibilities for the school psychologist could include the following: offering courses for parents in the evening in effective child-rearing practices, leading sensitivity training seminars for teachers and school administrators, the training of para-professionals to work with teachers and students, providing group counseling for potential drop-outs, designing a curriculum in the area of life adjustment skills or offering courses in the development of self-understanding for students. Implementing the suggestions presented in this report will require professional competency and consistent follow-through of the treatment program with the students as well as with the significant adults in the students' lives.

The requests for effective professional psychological services from teachers, parents, school administrators and students seems to become more urgent with each passing year.

If we are to function in significant roles in alleviating human suffering and in developing caring and competent citizens, it is the opinion of the writer that functioning school psychologists must expand and intensify their roles as well as critically evaluate the services that are presently being provided to their clients.

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